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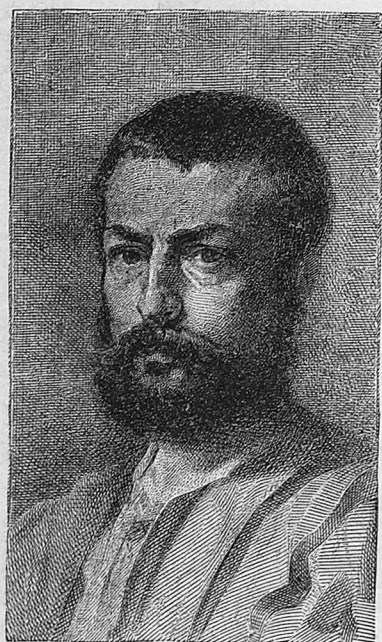
Gallery and Studio

THE MEISSONIER EXHIBITION AT PARIS.

THE long-announced exhibition of the works of Meissonier opened in the Petit Gallery in the Rue de Sèze, Paris, on May 24th, just fifty years after the artist exhibited his first picture, "Les Bourgeois Flamands," in the Salon of 1834. The exhibition

comprises 146 numbers, including three frames of studies, and the pictures range over the whole of the painter's artistic career, from the "Bourgeois Flamands" up to the allegory of "Paris, 1870-71," on which Meissonier was working on the very morning of the opening. Thus, although containing only about one third of the whole work of the artist's lifetime, the exhibition is nevertheless very complete in every respect; it enables us to study Meissonier's talent chronologically, in all its variety, and in many of his masterpieces.

Meissonier is not an artist whose work has ever given occasion for much discussion. His talent, exercising itself from the first within certain fixed limits, and bringing no new or strongly personal note in art, troubled no one, provoked no hostility, ruffled no prejudices, and, by dint of perseverance and implacable technical ability, ended by imposing itself upon the public in a series of "tours de force." His clear, logical, common-sense mind, loving precision, and naturally seeking after perfection, found an ideal in the Dutch school of the seventeenth century, and he at once set himself, not to imitating the masters of that epoch, but to painting in a style which had their sanction and authority. Confident and unswerving in purpose, Meissonier has remained faithful to himself throughout his long career. Although he began to paint when the Romanticists were completing their triumph, he remained unaffected by the artistic and literary influences which inspired that school. The lyrism and passion of Delacroix and Hugo had no charm for Meissonier, and even in the beginning of his career he seemed to stand already isolated in his century, unaffected by



MEISSONIER IN YOUTH.

count on the future, and whose works have their place assured in the galleries of the world among the most celebrated."

Now this judgment of Gautier, taken simply as it stands, is perhaps as fair a characterization of the artist

as we could desire; but owing to various circumstances which cannot be detailed here, Meissonier has come to be regarded as a colossal genius, as the greatest painter of the century, as a man who has for years reigned supreme over French art, and in whose apotheosis we are imperiously summoned to take part. Affirmation, however, is not proof, nor is exclamation or invective criticism. Meissonier's work is not all of one piece any more than that of any



JEAN LOUIS ERNEST MEISSONIER.

other painter, nor is it to be blindly admired or blindly condemned; but, on the contrary, to be carefully and respectfully studied. Let our blame or praise be supported by reasons.

One of my first impressions on seeing all these famous pictures together was one of astonishment to think that half a century had elapsed; that during that period France had seen several revolutions in politics, in art, in literature, in ideas, in fashion; that a new Paris had arisen and a new France had grown up on the top of old France, and that yet in the mean time, with a dozen exceptions, Meissonier had seen nothing, heard nothing, and felt nothing that his contemporaries were seeing, hearing, and feeling. For fifty years Meissonier has had the force of will to isolate himself and to keep his eyes fixed on other centuries and on those picturesque costumes of the past which have furnished him an inexhaustible series of "pretexts" for pictures. The exceptions are a few modern portraits, a few southern landscapes, the picture of "La Barricade," of the ruins of the Tuileries, and the allegory of "Paris, 1870-71," and half a dozen pictures devoted to the immortalization of the Napoleonic legend, which has always haunted him. But we may say truly that these rare incursions into the nineteenth century and its life have been accidents in Meissonier's career; the greater part of his life has been spent in the study, and, we may almost say, in the society, of people of the past—hallebardiers, mousquetaires, guards of the epoch of Louis XIII., encyclopedists of the eighteenth century who meet at Diderot's rooms, musicians, painters, gentlemen, and bravi. The resuscitation of this picturesque past seems marvelous—as far as we can judge who have never seen it. But how curious that a painter of such skill should so persistently have ignored his contemporaries and disdained to interpret the physiognomy of the society that he had before his eyes!

Another thing that strikes one is the very small rôle

that woman plays in Meissonier's compositions. The artist seems to avoid painting women, and in the few specimens, whether portraits or compositions, which we have, he has in no case succeeded in interpreting the grace, the charm, or the elegance of the model. No; the subjects that he treats with most satisfaction are men, but men in costume, whether civil, or military, or fantastic, seated or standing, on foot or on horseback, in repose or in movement. These men are of course models whom the artist strips of their characteristic vesture, and having clothed them with the costumes and trappings of the past, he makes them pose by preference in some arranged interior with appropriate accessories and surroundings. Such pictures are "Les Amateurs de Peinture," "A Painter Showing Drawings," "Young Man Working," "Young Man Reading at a Window," "The Confidence," "La Lecture chez Diderot," and the numerous readers, smokers, card-players, chess-players, painters, engravers, and bibliophiles, which are exhibited here, canvases often smaller than a sheet of note paper, and in which the figures are generally of microscopic dimensions. Now, in the case of Meissonier, as in the case of any painter of real worth and individuality, it is useless to make comparisons; we must take him for what he is, and seek in his work what he himself wished to put into it. Meissonier was free to choose his subjects and the conditions of treatment; he chose to reconstitute certain aspects of the life of the past and to paint his evocations in minute proportions, which demand extraordinary sureness of eye and hand. These latter qualities Meissonier devoted long years of labor to acquire, and that he has them in perfection nobody will dispute. But imagine, for a moment, the difficulty of painting in such conditions—the long studies and researches that must precede each picture begun, the second sight that

must carry the artist back into the past and make him penetrate into the very heart and soul of his characters, the observation, the patience, the fixity of purpose, the persistency. For each of these little pictures is not painted in a day, or a week, or a month, as those can testify who have entered Meissonier's studio and caught glimpses of those piles of sketches in which every detail of every picture is studied and reasoned out before the artist puts it on the panel. Meissonier aims at perfection in everything and he strives to achieve that perfection not by improvisation, not by genius, which perhaps he can hardly be said to possess, but by patient, persistent and conscientious labor. Thus, it seems to me, the pleasure we derive from the contemplation of Meissonier's work is intellectual rather than purely artistic or largely sensuous, as is the pleasure afforded by the work of many great colorists. Meissonier's pictures delight us not so much by themselves as by what we deduce from the subject. The artist admires the technical excellence, the exquisite bits of painting and tonality—within a limited



MEISSONIER IN MIDDLE LIFE.



"THE HERALD." ENGRAVED BY CH. BAUDE FROM A DRAWING BY MEISSONIER.

gamut of color—and the excellence of the drawing, but in every picture the human interest predominates and the composition is thoroughly reasoned out in

immense popularity. It is to be remarked, however, that this human interest rarely rises above the domain of average, every-day incidents and preoccupations,

and that there is not one of these pictures that cannot be thoroughly appreciated by the average man. One might indeed be tempted to qualify Meissonnier's talent as "bourgeois." I have above spoken of his works as a series of "tours de force." This is the inevitable impression when you see a number of his pictures together. Astonishment succeeds astonishment: on each little panel you see a simple and rational composition carefully thought out; the figures seem all full of their occupation, whether they are reading or smoking or playing cards or fiddling or breakfasting; the drawing is marvelous in its precision and photographic fidelity; the painting, in spite of its minuteness, is not without a certain largeness and frankness of touch; one wonders how the eye and hand of man can model so remarkably these microscopic figures; and the conclusion is invariably astonishment at the artist's prodigious execution. To tell the truth you get finally tired of being astonished and sick of this eternal precision of detail. You ask yourself what it all means, and why in Meissonnier's work it is always the drawing, this or that expression, the painting of this or that frill, or, in other words, always the details that present themselves to the memory and impose themselves upon the eye? Why are these pictures hard and dry and cold in spite of their miraculous execution? Can it

it is always inferior in humanity to the works of Ostade, Brauwer, and Jan Steen. In his military pictures on the other hand, in "La Campagne de France" with its pensive Napoleon followed through the dismal snow by his downcast marshals; in "1814" with the anxious emperor mounted on a white horse and surveying the battle-field of the morrow; in "La Barricade" with its heap of corpses lying abandoned, bleeding, pell-mell among the stones of the deserted barricade; in "Solferino" with the emperor and his staff animated by the expectation of victory; in all these pictures there is real emotion and a real interest beyond the mere stupefying precision of the drawing and other technical qualities. "La Barricade," that terrible drama of civil war, Meissonnier saw and felt; "Solferino" he saw and felt; and by sympathy and analogy he has felt and reconstituted the whole imperial epopee. "Solferino" alone would suffice for an enthusiastic critic to praise Meissonnier to the skies; the composition, the color, the proud bearing of the officers, the horses so admirable and so varied in movement, all this is excellent. This is indeed a modern battle where the killing is done at a distance and in virtue of long elaborated combinations, and where the brutal artillery has suppressed the active and picturesque courage of the combats of the past. In the valley yonder, where we see distant clouds of smoke, the soldiers on both sides are serving as targets for the cannon; but it is here on this eminence, among the calculators and geometers on



THE COLONEL OF THE THIRTEENTH CUIRASSIERS.

IN MEISSONNIER'S "1807," IN THE A. T. STEWART COLLECTION, NEW YORK.

such a manner as to concentrate the attention on the chief point of the little drama or comedy in question. And it is here that Meissonnier brings his intelligence in play and animates his figures with thought or sentiment. In this present reunion of Meissonnier's work it is most interesting to observe how wide has been the artist's study of expression. Reflection, contemplative admiration, meditation both serious and vague, and whether of the philosopher or of the lover, have given Meissonnier the subject of interesting compositions. In "La Confidence," where after breakfast a young lover in a rose-colored coat is reading a billet doux to an older companion, the painter has depicted even artless silliness. In his flute-players and violoncellists he has painted the interior satisfaction of the melomaniac with singular gusto, while in his card-players, his gourmands, his bravi and other more violent subjects, he seems to have set himself the task of interpreting all the ordinary and common expressions that can animate man's face. In the military pictures, too, with their interest of detail, we find this same constant preoccupation of human expression. All Meissonnier's little figures have in them thought of some kind, whether serene, jocose, melancholy or other; you see it in their looks and, of whatever nature the thought may be, the gestures and attitude are always in harmony with it and with the expression of the visage. It is to his excellent skill in rendering expression, to the human interest of his work, that we may perhaps most correctly attribute Meissonnier's

be that Meissonnier is wanting in personality in spite of all his skill? Think for a moment of humanity as interpreted by Millet, by Delacroix, by Ingres, by Watteau and by Holbein, to choose the most divinely personal masters. Compare a figure by any of these artists and a figure by Meissonnier, and you will see the difference between a personal and an impersonal artist, and you will see that instead of being an observer or an accumulator of facts or ideas, Meissonnier is a copyist, and a copyist of the photographic kind, impersonal, impassible, unhuman, almost a phenomenon.

By his archæological, costume or genre pictures—whichever may be the name preferred—Meissonnier does not seem to me to merit such high glory as it is customary to give him; this part of his work is curious rather than great, and though in many points of composition and execution superior to the Dutch masters,



A TRUMPETER OF THE TWELFTH CUIRASSIERS.

IN MEISSONNIER'S "1807," IN THE A. T. STEWART COLLECTION, NEW YORK.

horseback that the plan has been combined; it is these officers who surround the emperor and watch the scene from afar who will have gained the victory when it is

gained. "Solferino" is a true image of modern warfare, and in this simple and dramatic picture Meissonnier is truly a remarkable and at the same time a modern artist.

Meissonnier is again very great in his drawings and documentary studies, of which some seventy or eighty are here exhibited, being studies made for Mrs. Stewart's picture "1807." In these painted studies of horses in movement in all their details, of attitudes of riders, of accoutrements and costume, Meissonnier displays to perfection his prodigious talent for precise drawing and his miraculous sureness of eye.

THEODORE CHILD.

THE PARIS SALON.

TRIUMPH OF THE REALISTIC EVOLUTION — THE GREAT PICTURES OF THE YEAR — WORKS BY AMERICAN EXHIBITORS.

NEARLY 2500 oil paintings, about 750 drawings and water-colors, and over 700 pieces of sculpture, to say nothing of architecture and engraving, in all 4665 works, make up the contents of the Salon of 1884. The critic who set himself the task of conscientiously judging each of these works would run the risk of dying at his post. The productiveness of the French artists is terrifying; their ability, their technical skill, their "virtuosité" are perhaps unparalleled in the history of art; the present Salon is an even more than usually interesting artistic manifestation, abounding in works that command respect and deserve careful study. But what can the critic do? Within the space of a few columns of letterpress and within a few days of the opening of the exhibition he is called upon to give an account of the Salon as a whole, and to deliver an immediate opinion, at sight, on the most important works. The reader will, I hope, bear in mind the difficulties of the task, and remember that in these conditions approximate and often provisional justice is all that can be looked for in an analysis of the Salon such as modern journalism requires.

In the Salon of 1884 the break up of the Academic School of painting follows its course and the realistic evolution seems to triumph. And yet the most remarkable picture of the Salon, "The Sacred Wood dear to the Arts and the Muses," by M. Puvis

de Chavannes, is neither realistic in composition nor in color. It is a picture of vast proportions, some sixty

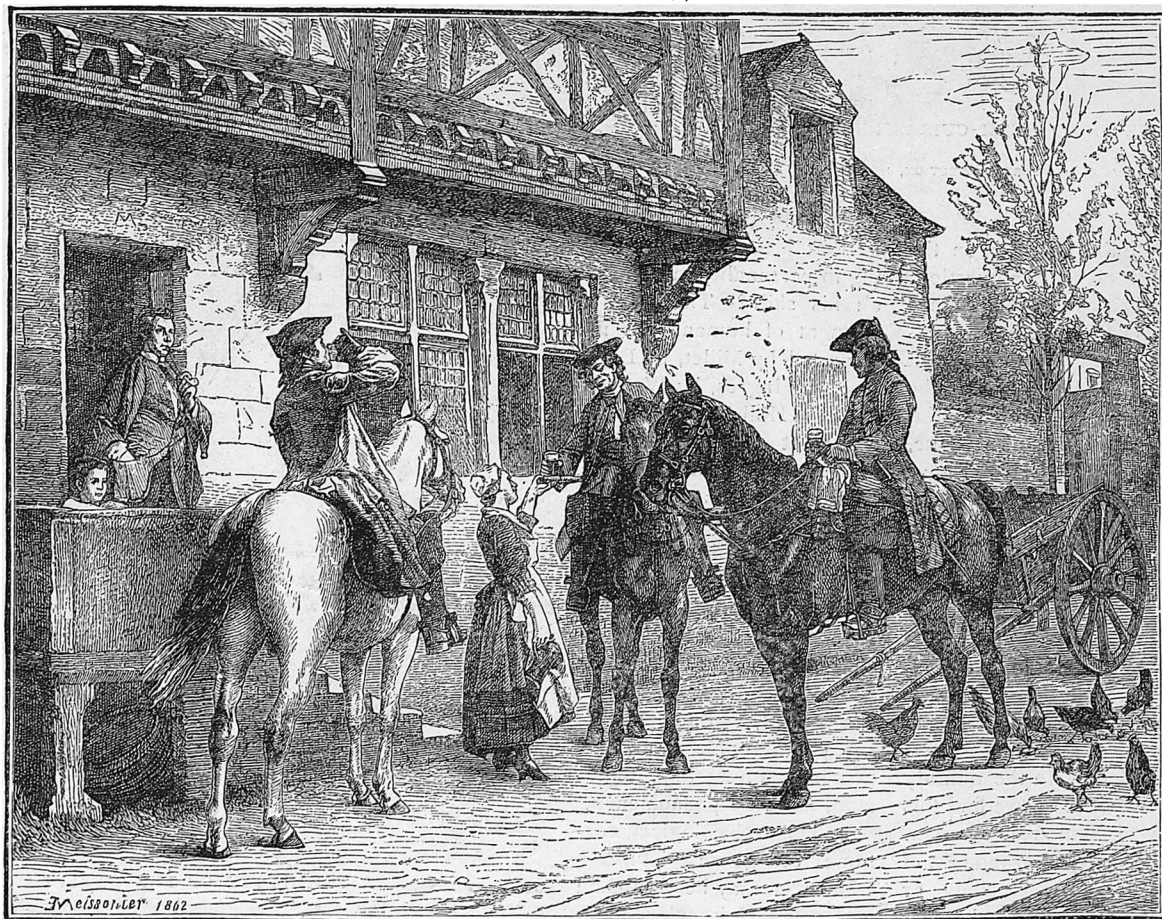
Raphael. In the middle of the picture is a temple composed of four columns and in front of it are grouped five of the muses. The other muses and Apollo form different groups, or are reclining separately in the flowery meadow that forms the foreground of the picture. On the left, in the sky, two flying figures bring the great lyre; to the right at the entrance of a wood composed of meagre, thinly-foliaged, straight-trunked trees, two children are gathering laurel leaves. Already a child has flung some flowers in front of the muse in the centre of the composition. A river flows in the middle distance behind the temple, and in the background rise some stern mountains which cast their reflection in the waters of the river. The meadow is of a grayish green; the mountains are ultramarine; the figures are dull white; the water is golden yellow; the trees are bluish gray and the costumes are pinkish gray; here and there in the grass are a few pale rose or blue flowers; and the general atmosphere of the picture is a bluish violet. We are at the hour of sunset and by the side of these golden waters the muses are singing and dreaming in a landscape of profound serenity. Looked at from the right distance, as a decorative composition, or rather as the idealized dream of a painter who is also a poet, "The Sacred Wood" presents a harmony of blue and gray that charms the eye, and a grand composition that fasci-

nates the mind all the more because instead of attempting to formulate precisely an impossible ideal,

M. Puvis de Chavannes has contented himself with awakening in us a notion of it, and leaving us, so to speak, three-quarters of his picture to paint by our own imagination. His muses are not beautiful like the muses of Raphael: M. Puvis de Chavannes, in his grand composition, simplifies drawing and modelling to the ultimate elements, and in his coloring he affects a systematic paleness, monotony and softness which never disturb the working of the spectator's literary imagination. One might criticise the insufficiency of M. Puvis de Chavannes's rendering of his dream, his wilful negligence of beauty, his summary drawing, and a dozen other peculiarities of his



"THE READER." BY MEISSONNIER. PARIS SALON, 1840.



"THE HALT." BY MEISSONNIER. PARIS SALON, 1862.

severe, and tranquil landscape, the artist has painted his dream of a subject that has already tempted

work; but one cannot deny the strange delicacy and the grand simplicity of his picture and the superiority